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Testimony Regarding

HB 5037, An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023

Judicial Department Budget

Appropriations Committee February 16, 2022



President & CEO
Mary Lee A. Kiernan

Good evening Senators Osten, Winfield & Miner, Representatives Walker, Candelaria & Pavalock-D'Amato, and members of the Committee. YWCA Greenwich Domestic Abuse Services (YWCA DAS) provides life-saving services to victims of domestic violence in the Town of Greenwich. Services include counseling, support groups, safety planning, court-based advocacy, transportation, assistance with securing basic needs and job training, and coordination with local law enforcement, among others.

We thank Governor Lamont for his proposal to allocate **\$14,865,300 in FY23 from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund (CSFRF) to the Judicial Branch to offset anticipated reductions in federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grants to victim service organizations** and urge your support. It is our understanding that this amount includes \$3,772,000 for CCADV and its 18 member organizations, including YWCA DAS for FY23. The Governor's proposal is clear that the final amount of funding allocated will be contingent on the final amount of reduced federal funding to the state.

As way of background, VOCA is funded through the fines and fees generated by federal prosecution, largely of white collar crime. The VOCA Fund does not contain any tax-payer dollars. The previous federal administration relied more heavily on the use of deferred prosecution and unfortunately federal law directed fines and fees from that type of prosecution to the General Treasury as opposed to the VOCA Fund. The federal VOCA Fix Act was signed into law this past summer ensuring that, moving forward, all fines and fees from deferred prosecution will be deposited into VOCA. However, due to several years of reduced deposits prior to the fix, the VOCA Fund has largely been drawn down resulting in an anticipated 50% reduction in victim assistance grants for the next two fiscal years to all states, including Connecticut, until the Fund can be replenished.

VOCA is a substantial funding source for our work to support domestic violence survivors. A 50% reduction in funding would devastate our ability to meet the growing needs of survivors. At YWCA DAS, VOCA funding supports 2.5 FTE advocates who serve nearly 450 victims. These services include criminal and civil court advocacy, crisis intervention, counseling, safety planning and advocacy with law enforcement, among others.

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A DV victim, JC, had endured all forms of domestic abuse for years at hands of her husband, with whom she has 2 children. In February 2020, after years of underreported abuse, her husband was finally arrested in another town in CT on domestic violence charges after he severely injured his wife in front of their children. After the arrest, JC started the divorce process, looking for a new beginning for her and her children. As is all too common, JC's husband became enraged when served with divorce papers. His abusive behavior escalated and continued to threaten and harass her, despite the order of protection already in place against him.

JC became disheartened and felt hopeless when the criminal court in which the arrest was being handled, reduced the original felony charges against her husband to misdemeanors. JC now felt that there was no point to call the police to report the numerous violations of the protective order, as she believed the criminal justice system had already failed her.

After calling our YWCA DAS hotline, JC was connected to our Adult Counselor who called the Greenwich police together with JC to report violations that had taken place in town. Greenwich police ultimately arrested JC's abuser on the violations, and he is currently facing criminal charges before the Stamford Superior Court.

YWCA DAS's VOCA funded staff, including JC's counselor and our Family Violence Victim Advocate (FVVA), have been working together to restore this victim's trust by providing her with much needed support and consistent, responsive communication, including advocating on her behalf to the appropriate court staff to ensure her voice is considered in court. Additionally, our FVVA advocated with the prosecutor in the other court district where the original arrest took place, who ultimately agreed to speak directly with the victim about the case.

JC has reported to feel more empowered to stand up for herself, ask for help when needed and to move on with her life without fear. JC continues to receive long-term counseling from YWCA DAS as she works toward creating a safe and independent life for herself and her children.

As has been widely reported, the Covid pandemic has resulted in a tremendous increase in demand for domestic violence services, as well as an escalation of the violence and danger victims experience. Our clients now present with an ever-increasing set of complex needs that they are unable to meet elsewhere. Our organization and staff have been working above and beyond to support victims and survivors as we all navigate this "new normal."

A 50% cut in funding would be absolutely devastating to our program and to our ability to provide these life-saving services to victims of domestic violence. Facing this kind of cut would force us to eliminate staff positions and potentially serve approximately 150 fewer victims.

We know that the VOCA funding gap is not a problem that was created by this or any other state government. Connecticut's Governor and General Assembly have been a model for supporting a strong response to domestic violence and we thank you for your continued leadership. Providing temporary, one-time state funding to address this federal funding issue will help ensure that our domestic violence service system can meet the ongoing needs of survivors without interruption.

We understand that the budget adjustments before you are specific to fiscal year 2023. It is important to note that the federal government anticipates the federal VOCA funding reduction will

be present for both fiscal years 2023 and 2024.

To the extent that CSFRF funds are available beyond FY23, we respectfully request that the Appropriations Committee allocate those funds to cover the VOCA funding gap for both FY23 and FY24. For CCADV and its 18 member organizations, including YWCA Greenwich Domestic Abuse Service, that would mean a total of \$7,544,000 (\$3,772,000 in each of FY23 and FY24).

Thank you for your consideration.

Meredith Gold, LMSW
YWCA Greenwich
Director of Domestic Abuse Services